

This year Blacks in Government (BIG) held its 25th Annual Training Conference in Denver, Colorado, on August 25-29, 2003. This year's theme was "*Achieving Excellence Through Professional Development*."

BIG functions as an employee support and advocacy organization with the primary mission to promote and enhance educational and training opportunities for Blacks in Government. With chapters throughout the United States and abroad representing more than 2.5 million public employees, BIG continues to be the largest organization dedicated to the interests of African American civil servants. This year's workshops, general and special sessions featured noted lecturers, elected officials, national leaders, and policy makers. The topics covered included information technology, communication skills, career development, personal performance and productivity, management and leadership skills, and Equal Employment Opportunity and human resource management.

Statistical Profile of Blacks in USDA:

The total employment and Black employment in USDA has decreased slightly since August 2002. As of the beginning of August, 2003, there were 9,690 Black employees, out of a total 90,233 in the USDA permanent workforce. Because Black employment decreased at a slightly greater rate (-1.2 percent) than the overall employment change (-0.7 percent) in the Department, there has been a modest decrease in the percentage of Blacks within the workforce decreased by one-tenth of a percent to 10.7 percent, compared with 10.8% at this time a year ago.

Black women significantly outnumber Black men at USDA. Black women outnumber Black men by nearly 2 to 1. In the overall workforce at USDA, the picture is reversed, and men outnumber women. In the overall USDA workforce men outnumber women 57.2 % to 42.8%.

Similar to the overall workforce, most Blacks are employed in technical occupations. In fact, Blacks are employed in technical occupations at nearly the same rate at the overall workforce, with 37.6% of Blacks employed in technical jobs, compared with 37.1% for the total workforce employed in technical jobs.

Beyond this similarity, Blacks are employed in a very different pattern of occupations from the overall workforce. For example, while the second highest category of occupations for Blacks is Administrative positions, the second highest category of occupations in the total workforce is Professional positions.

Blacks occupy administrative jobs at a significantly higher rate than the overall workforce - 32.2% for Blacks, compared with 23.7% overall. On the other hand, Blacks are employed in Professional occupations at roughly half the rate as the overall workforce - 15.7% for Blacks compared with 29.8% overall.

Blacks and women are the only employee groups at USDA in which their numerical representation in Professional occupations ranks third, behind administrative jobs. While the Department has come a long way over the years, a lot of work still remains to be done to increase Black participation in the ranks of the Professional occupations at USDA.

The most engaging session that I attended was the USDA Agency Forum. Presenters at this

session were Vernon Parker, Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights; David Winningham, Director, Office of Civil Rights; Clifton J. Taylor, Jr., Director, Workforce Planning, Employment & Development Division for the Office of Human Resources Management; Donald E. Arnette, Deputy Administrator for Management, Food and Nutrition Service; Thomas F. Kaplan, Competitive Sourcing Specialist for the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, Washington, D.C. headquarters; Joseph C. Alexander, Director, Management Consulting Services, Jupiter Corporation; Carol Fields, Chief, Employment Compliance and Technical Assistance Division, Office of Civil Rights; and Jack E. Nelson, Departmental African American Program Manager in the Employment Compliance and Technical Assistance Division, Office of Civil Rights.

The one topic that dominated the discussion was competitive sourcing. Competitive sourcing is one of the five initiatives in the PMA, a plan to reform the federal government by making its citizen-centered, results-oriented, and market based. It helps improve the performance and efficiency of commercial activities performed for the federal government. Competitions are held in which the costs and overall value of services are compared among private sector and federal government providers. It does not matter who wins - the desired outcome is the delivery of better services at the best value for the American taxpayer.

The government currently spends hundreds of billions of dollars each year on commercial services provided by 850,000 government employees. These services include everything from engineering, laundry, computer support, custodial services, fee collection at National Parks, eyeglass-making, landscaping, as well as other activities commonly available in the private marketplace. There were arguments for and against competitive sourcing. Critics of public-private competition argue that the benefits of competitive sourcing may be insufficient for agencies to pursue on a broad scale. Others, who fear that government providers cannot sustain the pressures of competition, assert that competitive sourcing will ultimately dismantle the workforce.

On average, the government wins just over 50% of public-private competitions. Even when the commercial sector is chosen to perform the activity, there generally are only a small number of involuntary separations of federal employees – 8% according to one study; 3.4% according to another. The Department of Interior, which has studied a significant number of commercial activities since the start of the Administration's competitive sourcing initiative, has experienced no involuntary employee separation. The percentage of involuntary separations should remain small. Nearly 40% of all federal workers will be eligible to retire by 2005, creating many new job opportunities across government.

Although armed with these statistics, the question of loss of government positions was resounding. What about those employees who lose their jobs? What happens to them? Well, there are several options available. The "Right of First Refusal" means that the employee must be considered for a job with the contractor. After the contractor wins, he must offer employment to government employees they consider qualified for the job. The employee must submit a resume and be interviewed for the job he has performed for years. If chosen for the job, the employee may gain an increase in salary but lose government health insurance, status, and leave. He will essentially have to start all over again. If the employee does not go to work for the contractor, then he must try to find a position somewhere else.

After the decision is made to contract out the work, government employees have about one year to find a new job. Or, instead of working for a contractor or another government agency, employees may be able to form their own company and compete. An Employee Stock Ownership Program (ESOP) is a company formed by employees. The company competes for the work and if they win they operate like any other private sector contractor. In this case, an employee will also lose his government status but gain ownership in the company and other benefits. The new company must operate and pursue other business to stay in business.

Well, there you have it, a glimpse at A-76. The competitions will continue and government employees will have to fight for their jobs. How long will A-76 last? The powers that be cannot say, but in its present form its expected to go on for at least another two years. Maybe the 2004 election will change the face of A-76 again.

Another interesting seminar deal with The No FEAR Act of 2002. On May 15, President Bush signed the first civil rights law of the 21st Century. The NO FEAR Act (for Notification and Federal Anti-Discrimination and Retaliation) substantially affects the lives and careers of millions of federal government employees.

The act fundamentally changes the way the government operates. As a result of this act, federal government agencies found guilty of discrimination will have to pay directly from their budgets for breaking the law. It also contains reporting requirements that will help determine whether a pattern of misconduct exists within an agency and whether that agency is taking action to address it. Also, agencies will be required to publicize on the Web, and other public information sources, detailed data related to their EEO complaint caseload. Specific guidance from EEOC is pending on this issue. The issue in question is how detailed the info will have to be. It requires that employees and managers be notified of their rights and responsibilities. And it strengthens protections for whistle blowers, who are often forced to choose between remaining silent about a dangerous or illegal situation and risking their careers by telling the truth.

No Fear